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WFU targets alcohol abuse

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Wake Forest University is taking several steps to curb binge drinking, including notifying parents of all alcohol infractions, opening a new building for student activities and increasing the grade-point average that students must maintain to pledge a fraternity or sorority.

The new rules, plus other changes to the Greek system and the campus social scene, are part of a plan released yesterday, in time for today's arrival of 1,200 freshmen. It was based on recommendations from faculty and staff members, students and residents who live near the campus.

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Administrators have long known that binge drinking among students has increased over the last 15 years. They estimate that about 25 percent of undergraduates on campus binge drink at one time or another.

But an off-campus party in January involving several hundred members of the school's Greek system prompted administrators to act more urgently, said Jill Tiefenthaler, WFU's provost.

Six students at the party were taken to local emergency rooms and treated for alcohol poisoning.

"We became incredibly concerned about the safety of our students," Tiefenthaler said. "We certainly were lucky that we didn't lose a student that day."

Committees formed to study the alcohol issue debated whether to delay the time when students can pledge a fraternity or sorority to the beginning of their sophomore year. The current pledge calendar, which allows freshmen to pledge at the beginning of the spring semester, was left intact. However, freshmen who pledge will be required to have a grade-point average of 2.5, up from 2.25.

Erik Spangenberg, the president of the Interfraternity Council at Wake, said he believes that many students in the Greek system will support the changes. The party that resulted in student hospitalizations scared students and made them realize that some changes needed to be made.

Beyond a set of rules, the plan is an attempt to make campus a more vibrant place for students to socialize after hours. That means more movie nights, dances and concerts. Parking lots near some residence halls will be closed on weekends to make room for large parties. A new building, "The Barn," will be available for group events. It should be open by the second semester.

Administrators said they feel that by keeping students on campus, they can better protect them

from such dangerous activities as "front-loading," which involves drinking heavily before heading out to bars and off-campus parties.

Tiefenthaler said that the new plan won't immediately change the climate on campus, but it's a start.

"I see what we announced as the first step in our continuing work of building vibrancy on campus. But certainly first and foremost, it addresses right away the safety of our students," she said.

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